

Character Class

Character Role: Your Place in the Party



by *Skip Williams*

The *D&D* game uses categories to help make sense of the complex game worlds it endeavors to simulate. Categories aren't exclusively the province of game designers. As a player, you, too, can use categories to organize your thinking and direct your creativity. This article opens the curtains for a brief look into the fundamental decisions behind a character class design, and that will allow you to match a character class to your character concept.

Four Basic Character Roles

From the game's early days back in the 1970s to today, the *D&D* game has used four basic structures for characters. Nobody has ever given these structures formal names, so for purposes of this article we'll call them Sturdy Brawler, Stealthy Rascal, Arcane Spellslinger, and Divine Guardian. Each of these character types contributes to a party's success in a different way, and the most effective parties have at least one character to fill each role.

It's possible for a single character to fill more than one of these roles, especially when you begin exploring the options that multiclassing makes available, but it's difficult to excel at two roles and nigh impossible to excel at three or four. So, here's our first lesson in character creation -- Pick a single role to fill in a party, at least to start. The best characters do one thing and concentrate on doing that one thing well.

Here's a look at what you're committing yourself to when you choose a role.

Sturdy Brawler

Physical combat is what these characters do best. When a party is on the move, these characters are the vanguard, boldly leading the way. Thanks to their position at the party's front, they're usually the first characters to witness an encounter unfolding. Their position at the front of a group on the march also leaves them in the best position to decide exactly where the party goes next when the group is exploring an unknown area.

In a fight, the party's sturdy brawlers generally are the first to attack the foe, usually by moving in and pinning down key foes with melee attacks. Once a battle is in progress, these characters form a fighting line that shields more vulnerable party members from attack. Their heavy armor and high hit points allow them to bear the brunt of the enemy's attacks.

Physical tasks, from smashing down doors to hauling around treasure (and the occasional helpless ally), generally fall to a group's sturdy brawlers.

As a sturdy brawler, traps are among the worst hazards you'll face. Sturdy brawlers have an unfortunate habit of blundering into traps when marching out front. Ambushes or fights with unexpectedly numerous foes can leave you flanked or completely surrounded. Enemies with special melee or short-range attacks (such as energy drain, improved grab, or gaze attacks) can wreak havoc with you. Because few sturdy brawlers boast great Will saves, enchantment spells and effects can quickly neutralize you or, worse, turn you against your allies.

One of your most important functions in a group is keeping dangerous foes away from the party's vulnerable arcane spellslingers. In return, arcane spellslingers can use their spells to cut down massed foes that threaten to overwhelm you. Stealthy characters can help locate traps and other hazards before you fall into them, and in battle stealthy characters can use their generally superior mobility to set up flanking attacks with you, to both characters' benefit. You'll depend on the party's divine guardians for cures and protective spells. A steady supply of *cure light wounds* spells can keep you going through thick and thin.

Character classes that are well suited to the sturdy brawler role include the barbarian, fighter, and paladin from the *Player's Handbook*, the knight and the dragon shaman from *Player's Handbook II*, and the hexblade, swashbuckler, and samurai from *Complete Warrior*.

Stealthy Rascal

These characters can take the fight to the enemy fairly well, but they often do better with a more subtle approach to adventuring. They generally have skills that allow them to serve as a party's eyes and ears. These characters also often have interaction skills that make them the most able negotiators in a party, which can prove handy when combat doesn't seem the best option.

Stealthy rascals often find themselves in the thick of that action during combat, especially if they've moved away from a group to scout the way ahead. Even if they take a more prudent approach, they do best when working in concert with the group's sturdy brawlers. Stealthy rascals can pair up with the group's more martial foes to set up flanking attacks or at least protect their allies' flanks. They're also mobile enough to bypass or penetrate the enemy line and attack leaders or spellcasters skulking in the rear.

As a stealthy rascal, you'll often find yourself plunging into situations you cannot handle on your own. When that happens, you must either stick it out until help from the main party arrives or quickly retreat to a place of safety. You would do well to avoid combat against superior numbers or more physically capable foes. Like a sturdy brawler, you can fall prey to melee-based or short-range special attacks. Your lighter armor and lower hit points make you even more vulnerable to critical hits and special attacks that deal large amounts of damage, such as rending or constriction attacks. Most stealthy rascals have excellent Dexterity scores, which means you can do very well with ranged weaponry.

As we've already noted, you can do well when working in tandem with sturdy brawlers in combat. You also usually have the speed to move to any location on the battlefield where you're needed. You might be the only character who can get into position for a quick attack when a foe performs an unexpected maneuver or ambushes the group. Timely intervention from you can literally save an arcane spellslinger's life. Given your penchant for getting into trouble, you'll often depend on medicinal effects from the group's divine guardian.

Character classes that are well suited to the stealthy rascal role include the bard, ranger, rogue, and monk from the *Player's Handbook*, and the ninja, scout, and spellthief from *Complete Adventurer*.

Arcane Spellslinger

These characters often serve as a party's heavy artillery, using spells that literally blast away massed foes. An arcane spellslinger's spells also can clear away or help circumvent obstacles that defy mundane assaults, reveal hidden information, and provide many other effects that expand a group's options for dealing with an encounter.

Arcane spellslingers do best when they stay well away from combat. Even if an arcane spellslinger can manage to complete a few spells while a foe attacks, the character's low Armor Class and even lower hit points generally mean that the arcane spellslinger won't survive long in a physical contest. Still, arcane spellslingers need to stay close enough to a battle so that they can aim their spells for best effect.

As an arcane spellslinger, enemy melee attacks pose a grave danger to you. So do enemy ranged attacks, but melee attacks generally deal much more damage than ranged attacks and have a greater chance to disrupt your spellcasting or kill you outright. Spells or effects that fill whole areas also can cut you down before you can get out of harm's way.

You must rely on all your other allies to keep foes at a safe distance. To get the most from your spells, coordinate your efforts with the group's sturdy brawlers and stealthy rascals. You need to aim your spells so that your fighting allies aren't caught in the effects, and fighting allies should take care to leave you a clear field of fire somewhere on the battlefield. You also should compare your spell selections with the divine guardian's spells to avoid duplication and to cover as many gaps in each other's capabilities.

Character classes that are well suited to the arcane spellslinger role include the sorcerer and the wizard from the *Player's Handbook*, the beguiler and the duskblade from *Player's Handbook II*, and the warlock, warmage, and wu jen from *Complete Arcane*.

Divine Guardian

While divine guardians can hold their own in combat, their true power lies in the spells and granted supernatural powers they wield. Most divine guardian spells serve to protect, reinforce, or revivify allies, but they also have spells that can defeat foes or achieve other useful results.

In a fight, a divine guardian can serve on the front line fairly well. Depending on the spells the character has available, a divine guardian also can do fairly well by hanging back with the group's arcane spellslinger and launching spells at foes. This approach keeps the character close to the vulnerable arcane spellslinger in case that character needs quick healing or a bodyguard. It's also possible for a divine guardian to switch between these tactics from fight to fight or even from round to round within a single encounter. A divine guardian with ranks in the Concentration skill can use that rule for casting spells defensively and casting spells right from the front line.

When you're a divine guardian, everyone in a party looks to you for lifesaving healing, especially the group's sturdy brawlers, who tend to absorb considerable physical punishment. All the group's fighting characters can benefit from your presence in the front line in a battle. If nothing else, you'll offer foes an additional target and so dilute their efforts at least a bit. You

also can fight in partnership with an ally, working to flank enemies while protecting the ally's flanks. If you travel in a group's rear or center, you'll usually be in the best position to rescue an ally who has fallen prey to an ambush or trap, either with a spell or literally by dragging the hapless character out of danger. As noted earlier, you'll do well to compare your spell selection with whatever the group's arcane spellslinger carries to maximize your group's magical potential.

Character classes that are well suited to the divine guardian role include the cleric and the druid from the *Player's Handbook* and the favored soul, shugenja, and spirit shaman from *Complete Divine*.

In Conclusion

It's helpful to keep in mind that the four categories presented here are useful guidelines for planning and playing characters, not inflexible rules. You can have a successful and memorable character by playing against the suggestions made here. For example, a cleric with the right mix of spells can prove as devastating in close combat as a fighter or paladin. With a different mix of spells, a cleric can serve up magic as deadly to the foe as any wizard's.

Likewise, some characters defy easy classification into a single category. For example, the favored soul and the ranger are both very martial characters. A ranger can be a real melee machine, especially if you choose the two-weapon combat style and you're fortunate enough to meet a favored enemy. Likewise, a favored soul can prove as stalwart in combat as a fighter or paladin with the right spells. Always consider what your character's class offers when playing a character.

In a similar vein, you must always consider what your allies bring to an adventure. This is especially true when your group contains several characters that all fill the same role. For example, if your group has three arcane spellslingers and you're playing a sturdy brawler, you'll need to adjust your tactics. You should consider emphasizing ranged combat over melee (so you're not caught in the volley of destructive spells your allies will launch at your foes), and you'll need to conserve your hit points or load up on healing potions (or both), because you won't have a divine guardian on hand to piece your character back together when a foe or a trap beats you up.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.
